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The Presidency

by HUGH SIDEY

The exhilarating crucible of crisis

Crisis, in a bizarre way, fascinates strong men. And the ultimate arena for it in this age is the White House. Those who work in the back corridors where decisions are made are completely gripped by it, enthralled not only by the peril but also by the exercise of raw and instantaneous power in the purest sense.

When a crisis is at hand, the normal routines of diplomatic mush dissolve into terse orders that send fleets into position or planes aloft. Many of the hotline messages between Lyndon Johnson and Alexei Kosygin were only a sentence or two long, yet each word spelled out more than all the ambassadorial cables of the year before. So compelling is the brotherhood of crisis that those who once were part of it never forget. There is no doubt, for example, that McGeorge Bundy, the former Kennedy and Johnson national security staff chief, was lured back to help guide U.S. policy on the Middle East crisis by his relish for the kind of intense diplomatic contest that seemed to be in the offing.

In a very real sense international crisis is a high wire act in which a man and his methods are put to a test. It is also a crucible in which reputations are enhanced or reduced. As the bearer of ultimate authority and responsibility, Lyndon Johnson generally gets good marks for his restraint of the last two weeks. But the weaknesses in the U.S. Middle East policy are coming to the surface now and they will be debated on the political stump as well as in the world courts. Preoccupied by events in Vietnam, the President and his advisers had allowed the Middle East to become such an orphan that for five months last fall and winter the job of Assistant Secretary of State for Near East and South Asian Affairs went unfilled. And for the crucial three months before the onrush of the crisis [illegible] bassador to Egypt. Indeed, Richard Nolte, the man belatedly appointed to that post, arrived only a few days before the conflagration and by that time Nasser was beyond earshot: Nolte never got to see him.

Just as the President is judged by his performance under extreme stress, so are those who work for him. It was U.N. Ambassador Arthur Goldberg's misfortune to be on view not only before his peers in the Administration but also before the world. Thus the assessment of his performance turned largely on style rather than substance, and as a result the generally high esteem in which he was held is now somewhat tarnished. His performances in the Security Council were considered less than inspiring. Over-wordy, cliché-ridden, downright boring at times, he did not provide those moments of soaring inspiration that are needed by both the delegates and the television audience. Those who watched remembered the old jibe of John F. Kennedy, whose fondness for Goldberg was unmatched but who also prized brevity. "Once Arthur gets in front of a microphone," Kennedy said, "it would be extremely helpful if he would just shut up."

On the other hand, there were two men who gained considerably in the eyes of their peers and the President: General Earle ("Bus") Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who provided Johnson with capability estimates that showed the Israeli army gaining victory in three or four days; and CIA Director Richard Helms, who helped supply Wheeler the data on which the estimate was based. Goldberg and others were so skeptical that Johnson sent Wheeler back to restudy and to check his predictions with Helms. The estimate came back as before and events proved it out. Indeed, the abysmal failure of Russian intelligence as compared to the CIA has already helped the agency regain some of the stature lost in the recent disclosures about its involvement with educational and labor groups.

Public opinion samplers routinely zero in on crises and their aftermaths to evaluate Presidents. Pollster Louis Harris believes that new data will show L.B.J.'s personal [illegible] ably because of the way the Middle East crisis came out. Beyond that, Harris es-

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timates that the Mediterranean episode will help rally Vietnam support for the President and tend to discourage dissent.

Within the White House crisis is a chance to change pace, to shake loose tiresome ceremony and postpone persistent petty problems. By the same token it demands total concentration and the physical well-being that makes this possible. Three weeks ago, when this crisis began to build, Special Assistant for National Security Affairs Walt Rostow cautioned his brother Eugene Rostow, who as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs would be a key figure, to make certain he got his eight hours' sleep because the crisis was going to be long and wearing and fatigue alters a man's judgment. Walt Rostow missed his morning tennis tune-up only once—the day war broke out. Similarly, one of the first orders Bundy gave as he took on his new peace-planning job was to partition off sleeping quarters and a kitchen for himself and his staff in the executive office building across the street from the White House.

The sheer drama of a crisis is fully appreciated by those who are caught up in it. The first exchanges on the hot line were intense history. Before he turns in for the night, Lyndon Johnson sometimes fondles his notebook of messages to and from the U.S.S.R.'s Kosygin, as if he had possession of the Dead Sea scrolls. The midnight car rides, the secret couriers, the comradeship of men sharing concern—these are part of the drama.

If John Kennedy has a foothold in history it is due in large part to the way he handled the Cuban missile crisis. Our ambassador to Russia, Llewellyn Thompson, has enjoyed the very highest reputation in the diplomatic ranks and won another hitch in Moscow because of his cool and unerring calculations of the probable Russian responses over Cuba and since then. Kennedy called U.S.-Soviet confrontations "the chess game" and freely admitted that it was the most thrilling part of his job. Lyndon Johnson isn't quite so open about it. But in private moments, when he is asked if he likes being President, he no longer evades the answer. "Yes," he says. "Yes."

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